

## Prem

Mamman passed away on May 29, 2007. On that date, she merely passed away. She never really lived her life the way most of us define life. If we define life as attachment to this world then she was always removed from it. She defined her own life and however much we may fret over it, she never lost sight of what she had defined. She believed in another world, a world where I was the president of the country, married to Vivekta and later Harpreet; she was the heiress to many crore rupees; and she was an invincible power – Subramaniam. According to her, Giani Zail Singh and Rajiv Gandhi had lived on rent in her father's home. We, the sane ones, called it schizophrenia.

I discovered Mamman's cancer on April 26. Her sister, my Masi Guddi Aunty, is a doctor. Masi came to pick her up on May 4. On May 5 we were in Dabwali, 3000 kms away. The doctors had said since Mamman's breast cancer had crossed Stage IV, she should be on palliative care. What Masi and I did was palliative care – an effort to minimize her pain.

While Mamman was in Bangalore, when she had pain or was tired of her existence she wished me to be the president and wanted to go to the Rashtrapati Bhavan with me. In mid-April I typed out a declaration on a stamp paper. It said that Mamman, daughter of S. Sarwan Singh Sidhu, hereby declares that her son Amandeep Singh Sandhu is the president of the nation. I told her the paper had come from the Rashtrapati Bhavan. She signed it. In her mind I was formally the president of India.

Once she reached Dabwali she stopped expressing her desires, as if they vanished.

Mamman did not go to the toilet all through the 13-hour journey home – to Delhi airport to Masi's own private hospital in Dabwali in an ambulance that Masi had kept ready at Delhi airport. What is even more surprising is that in Cancer Stage III, just a month before she was diagnosed as Stage IV, she traveled by airplane, train, cars, and taxis from Bangalore to Punjab and back. Did she not have pain or did she not show it to us or was her schizophrenia a block between her body and her mind or was it that she had simply left her body and reached a realm in her mind where nothing could affect her any more? Never once in her 25-day stay in Dabwali did she complain or ask for anything. Where was she?

When we reached Dabwali we started staying in the room Nanaji had once occupied and in which he had passed away. We shared a double bed. It was a dream come true for her. She adored her father. Prem, Masi's Man Friday, had got the room ready for us. I asked for the cots to be shifted closer to the bathroom attached to the bedroom. We got Mamman a narrow, tall table so that she could eat from the bed. Very quickly Masi got used to the pattern of care I had been following before we went to Dabwali.

Since early April I had started sleeping for about 15 minutes at a time, three or four times a day and night. Mamman had started losing weight in January and since then I had never slept for more than two hours at a time. In those wakeful nights I learnt to meditate by focusing on the space between my eyes.

I gave Mamman medicines at 6 AM, 7 AM, 12.30 AM, 3 PM, 7 PM, and 9 PM. Dr. Ramaa, Mamman's oncologist anesthetist, had said Proxyvon should be administered every eight hours. That kind of consistency might prevent the need for Morphine. I followed the routine and Mamman did not get pain.

Proxyvon is a simple drug, available without a doctor's prescription; it is also cheap. I saw the simple drug working wonders. We tend to not trust drugs because we tend to be irregular with taking them. We do not trust the medical process. We let our mind interfere with care and question it.

For me, taking care of Mamman was a process of believing that I could not fight the illness but I could at least prepare her to face it in the best way possible. The image in my mind was of a person bent in prayer, in *sajdah*, on his knees and head bowed to the ground, a mighty wind blowing, and the earth opening up. We had no control over the fury. Cancer is an illness like that; it annihilates you, and it is certain death. The only way I knew to handle it was to submit to it completely and let it do what it would, but like in *sajdah*, become the smallest possible in front of it, in embryonic state, and hope that the ravage is minimized. I wanted Mamman to come into her embryonic state and hoped I would be able to provide the warmth a child needs when she is defenceless and totally vulnerable.

I have known Dr. Ramaa for around ten years. She is a friend to Chinni's mother. I have exchanged brief pleasantries with her but I did not know she worked among cancer

patients. When Famida, our maid, told me she had seen blood on Mamman's bra I went upstairs to check on Mamman. Mamman had bathed at 5 AM all her life. When Famida saw the blood Mamman had not been able to get up and have her bath. I apologized to Mamman and lifted her *kurta*. She did not mind it. What I saw shocked me. I saw her right breast completely lacerated, a huge cut was kind of stitched up, and it cut across her breast. Under the breast she had a huge hole. It was almost 1" by 1.5". I asked Mamman if this came from a wound she had been talking about for almost two years. I asked her what had poked her. She did not know.

A few days back it had been very difficult to rouse Mamman to take her to meet Dr. Prasad, her cardiologist for the last few years. He had also been Papa's cardiologist. He had brought up Mamma's left ventricle ejection fraction functioning to 48 from 32. In January he had taken an X-ray to determine some opacity in Mamman's lungs. He had prescribed diuretics. Masi had also seen the X-ray when we had met her in March. She had said it was pleural opacity, water in the lungs. She even spoke to Dr. Prasad. According to Dr. Prasad, Mamman had been cardiomyopathic for long.

Four years ago he had given her six months. He had no reason to think that she had not had a left ventricle failure. I checked on medical web sites, it is true that almost all cases of pleural opacity in cardiomyopathic patients are a direct result of the left ventricle failure. When Masi said the word 'malignancy' in March I did not understand it to mean cancer. Masi assumed Dr. Prasad is the doctor, he knows best. She even showed the X-ray to other doctors, all of whom agreed with Dr. Prasad's diagnosis.

That is what I find problematic. The fact that we let other roles, other people, and our lack of detailed knowledge about a subject influence us to such an extent that we are incapacitated. We become dependent and are misled because we do not ask the basic questions.

I had two problems, or three, in taking Mamman to Dr. Prasad:

- a) Mamman could not make a trip to the doctor.
- b) Over the last two months I had noticed that Dr. Prasad had started going in circles about his medication. We had started with Frusenex and when I had called him from Patiala in the end of March he had prescribed Rabicep. When that made Mamman uncomfortable he went back to Frusenex. In between he

had tried Dytor, Zytanix, and Aldactone, which had just not suited her. The problem with diuretics is that they make you urinate often. For some time now Mamman had not been able to get up to go to the bathroom and she refused to urinate on the cot, even in a plastic urinal. My faith in Dr. Prasad's ability to prescribe a good drug was not very high.

- c) Here is the soft issue: Dr. Prasad was a good doctor but not open enough to extend his hand where we needed it most. He had earlier refused to come home to look at Mamman. He believed that if a patient needed a home visit by a doctor then the patient should be shifted to the hospital. That might be true but Mamman's case was slightly different. She was schizophrenic and she believed that if she went to a hospital she would die. She wanted to be home. Dr. Prasad had given me permission to call him any time, especially when I took Mamman to meet him. He always tried to organize a quick check up. Yet, because the meeting place at the Raghav Diagnostic Centre is badly organized, once I had to wait there for 2.5 hours without meeting Dr. Prasad. Later he was apologetic and had even said he could make an exception and meet us at Rajshekhar Hospital, which was closest to our home. But he was always hasty on the phone. I was not comfortable disturbing him.

Dr. Prasad is a good man and has been a good doctor to Mamman. He has ensured she lived a few more years. I did not have the courage to impose upon him.

You want the doctor to be relaxed when he meets you.

I mentioned Mamman's wound to Cheryl and she thought of Dr. Vidya, her neighbour. Dr. Vidya is a young doctor, around 27 years of age. She does not have much experience but she saw the reports with fresh eyes. She was aided by the knowledge that I had seen something external on Mamman's chest.

When she saw the X-ray, she noticed another growth in the breast but did not say anything. I took her upstairs to examine Mamman. I stood at the door of the room, behind a curtain. Dr. Vidya spoke nicely with Mamman and came out, and I accompanied her down the steps.

We were on the steps when she turned around and said it was cancer. She said maybe it was tuberculosis. No, she said, it was cancer.

She said I must go to a government hospital and get Mamman's tissue and blood culture. She said I must not go to a private hospital because the Apollos would fleece me. Mamman had around four lakhs insurance from my office, another two lakhs of personal insurance, and I had my credit cards worth yet another four lakhs. She said the worst was the private hospitals would not allow me to discharge Mamman. Dr. Vidya mentioned Kidwai Institute and Bangalore Institute of Oncology.

Anbu and Cheryl were with me, and left soon after Dr. Vidya. It was touching of them to be considerate about my grief. I talked to Chinni's mother, Jayanti Aunty, and she mentioned Dr. Ramaa. That is how I got in touch with Dr. Ramaa.

I do not think it was because of the personal connection, though that might have played a role, but Dr. Ramaa was so refreshing. She asked me where I wanted a cancer specialist to look at Mamman: Diwakar's or Kidwai? I opted for Kidwai because though Diwakar's is closer I would have been able to meet Dr. Ramaa at Kidwai. I knew at Kidwai they would be able to do the tissue and blood cultures, if needed. I wanted someone I knew to have a look at Mamman.

I have it recorded in my diary that the night before I decided to take Mamman to Kidwai I was scared, very scared. I was not scared of losing Mamman. Over the last few months I had prepared myself for that. I had spent hours crying in front of the TV. I was scared of what Mamman would have to go through, the pain she would get. I was scared about whether she would be able to handle it. Whether I would be able to handle it.

I had no doubt about my ability to provide care to Mamman but I was scared about how I would intervene between the pain and her. How could I prevent the mighty illness, her cancer, from doing what it could do to her? I was scared about what I had heard about the illness. I was scared about how little I knew about what to do in the face of this illness which wastes you completely.

We reached the Kidwai at 9.05 AM. Kidwai is very close to my office, on the other side of the Dairy Circle, next to NIMHANS. I was surprised that until then I

had not noticed this institute. One of the reasons I had not noticed it until then was that it was so close to NIMHANS that it was shaded by NIMHANS, and second was that I did not need to go there, ever.

I called Dr. Ramaa. She came out and arranged a wheel chair. Mamman chose to not wait and walked down to the Operation Theatre. On the way her legs gave way and she took the wheel chair. At 9.10 AM we were at the OT and Dr. Ramaa took Mamman in at 9.15 AM. She asked me to wait outside. Three doctors, or four, examined Mamman. Dr. Vijay Kumar was the main specialist. By 9.30 AM Mamman was out. I asked her to sit in the wheel chair and at 9.40 AM Dr. Ramaa called me in.

She was alone. She said it was Cancer Stage IV. She said she did not understand how it had gone undetected until then. She asked what Mamman's heart specialist had done if he could not find this out. The two illnesses are less than six inches apart from each other. Given, she said, it was not part of his job but he could have looked at Mamman's chest.

She asked how I was managing. I could no longer control myself.

I started crying. I could not be brave any longer. She asked me if I was married. I said we did not stay together. I said I had been doing everything, from feeding to cheering up Mamman. I told her Mamman listens to me, she always does as I ask her to do. I told her I feel fortunate that I can take care of her so completely. But, I said, I was also tired. Very tired. I told her I was scared of the pain Mamman would get.

She said that she was the anesthetist; it was her job to manage pain. She said that from then on Mamman would come under her care. I thanked her. She asked me to call her later and get the medicines. She said Mamman did not need any tissue culture. The doctors had seen her and their decision was as good as one could get after tests. She said if they had detected the illness earlier they could have done something. They could have surgically removed it, done chemotherapy.

I said in a way it was good that we found the illness now. We cannot do anything and Mamman need not get disfigured. She said yes, 'body image' was important.

I met Dr. Vijay Kumar briefly. I told him I wanted to avoid the pain. He said that would be their effort too, to control the disease. I wondered about the use of the word 'control'. As far as I knew, you do not control cancer. It controls you. Still, I appreciated the effort the doctors had been making to fight the illness.

We came out. Dr. Ramaa consulted with Dr. Vijay Kumar and asked me to get Letroz, Proxymon, Betnosol, and Pantodac. She told me the routine to administer the medicines. Manju from Manju Medicals could provide the medicines. He even had to consult with Dr. Ramaa over the phone. We made three calls within five minutes. She answered us patiently, without giving a sign that she was offended by the frequent calls. I wanted to hug her, this is how a doctor should be: always calm, always composed, always willing to help, an aware caregiver.

After that, until I left Bangalore on May 4, for a week or so, she asked me to call her every day. We discussed a stage when Mamman's wound would start oozing and smelling bad. She might need dressing. Dr. Ramaa asked me to wait until that stage comes. She said she would arrange something.

Masi also called Dr. Ramaa. They spoke doctor to doctor. Later we called her every few days from Dabwali. She was always patient.

Masi told me she wanted to come and see Mamman. I said that was not possible. If Masi wanted to come then we must return with her. I felt Mamman could not handle Masi meeting her and leaving alone. I said if we were to come to Dabwali then Masi must come and take Mamman from here. That would be the fulfillment of Mamman's lifelong dream. For me it was an assertion of Masi's intention. Masi would have been responsible but that action would have meant that Masi accepted the complete responsibility of what would happen.

That evening Mamman got pain. I had finished an office conference call downstairs and had missed a call by Masi. I started calling Masi before I went up to check on Mamman. I was telling Masi about Mamman's check up in the morning when Masi said she wanted to speak to Mamman. Mamman was quiet

when I started climbing the stairs. I reached Mamman and told her Masi wanted to speak to her. Mamman took the mobile phone and the first words she spoke were a howl. Masi must have started saying something to Mamman but Mamman could not hear, she was groaning. Her scream was high-pitched. I reached to take the phone and Mamman said to Masi that she should see to it that I get married to Harpreet. I told Masi I would call later.

I held Mamman's hand and knelt down near her bed. She started removing her gold bangle and *kada*, trying to give it to me. I asked where it was paining and she kept her hand on her right rib. I gently removed her hand and placed my hand there. I could do nothing more. She was in acute pain. I kept my hand on Mamman's ribs and tried to console her. I encouraged her to cry but she did not cry. After 5-7 minutes the pain subsided. When the pain came down Mamman took the hand I had kept on her ribs and kissed it. She said I was her God.

I called Masi and told her Mamman was okay. She spoke to Mamman. I fed Mamman and gave her the medicines. From that moment I never missed a single minute in administering the medicine. Proxyvon is a big capsule and Mamman had occasional difficulty swallowing it. Still she always took it on time.

I wrote to my managers, telling them I might have to leave for Punjab. I wrote, 'I hope Oracle can use my services'. My managers decided not to let the higher ups know I was going to work remotely. They took the responsibility on themselves. In the next few days I arranged for Masi's tickets. I asked Micheal to help Masi at Delhi airport.

In the days between the scream and our leaving I stabilized Mamman on Proxyvon. Dr. Ramaa and I kept debating whether we should start Morphine. These days Morphine comes as an oral pill but for that one had to register with the Kidwai institute. One can get Morphine pills from very few hospitals in India. Dr. Ramaa decided to give me a letter to a doctor in PGI Chandigarh. She said I could take it from there in case everything else stopped working. Punjab burnt politically after Mamman reached Dabwali and until a few days before she passed away. The issue was that a God-man was photographed dressed like a Sikh Guru. The Sikhs were up in violence until the God-man asked for an apology. It was a

farce in the name of religion, a quest about the presence of God in everyday life. The whole state was suffering with Mamman; they should have just looked at her.

Masi came on May 4. Micheal did a wonderful job of helping Masi, a first time air traveller, of guiding her through the whole process. I sent Sundra to get Masi from the airport. Cheryl went with him.

Before I left Cheryl took cheques from me to manage my accounts. She and Manoj loaded the lap top computer so well that I did not need anything after I reached Dabwali. A few colleagues from the office came to see me before I left.

Meghna came down from Madras and took Mamman's picture. That picture is now my desktop image for my computer.

It took us almost an hour and a half to reach the airport. The Sahara airline service was poor until they agreed to let us fly. They wanted a certificate declaring Mamman fit to travel. I did not understand what they wanted and was trying to show them the reports that Mamman was ill. When I booked my tickets the person never told me over the phone that they needed a 'fit to travel' declaration certificate. I tried to tell them that Masi was a doctor. They were not interested. They only needed Masi's letterhead. We could not supply that.

I should have understood. Everybody would like to wash their hands off your problem. I did ask the booking clerk what he would do if his mother were ill. He told me not to mention his mother. Later, after arranging for seats, he told me that his mother did suffer from cancer. I learnt that most of us react by not wanting to take up another person's problem but once someone buys into our situation they do want to do their best.

Once the airline agreed to let Mamman travel, after we signed a declaration that we would not sue the airline, they were very good towards us. They arranged for the wheel chair, gave special security clearance, and an early entry into the aeroplane. When we reached Delhi the airline arranged for a special bus only for us and the wheel chair. Micheal had even arranged for an ambulance from the aircraft to outside the airport.

Brave. That is the word I have to express what I thought about Mamman. We have known stories of soldiers fighting to defend the country and we call that

bravery. We know of people climbing mountains, scraping the bottom of oceans and we call it courage. Yet, there is so much bravery in the way some of us face life and death. Mamman suffered a lot but did not once cry, or complain, or express any anger at her situation. She bore it stoically. I have not been able to understand what removed her from her pain. All I can say is that she was extremely brave.

I sensed the same in my father in his life and towards his end. For a while when Mamman was ill in Bangalore I kept seeing and judging her actions and words in light of what I had seen in Papa in his last days. I think unconsciously I was looking for hints in her behaviour to judge if the signs were fatal. I do not know if I was being a coward or if I was trying to be better prepared. Never once did I give her an indication that I was seeing her nearing death or was I without humour.

This attitude of mine was tested much more intensely in the period when we were with Masi. When we were there I played Mamman's favourite cassette that has the songs: '*Jeena yahan, marna yahan,*' and '*Mera joota hai japani.*' I told Mamman stories of princesses and fairies. I combed Mamman's hair. I gave Mamman points on how she did her tasks, ate food, took medicine, drank juice, and went for the bath. I never let her see I was worried. But her stoic nature was much more brave. Her attitude was always prepared in the face of her ultimate defeat. I feel she did not lose to death. She conquered her body and mind.

In *Sepia Leaves* I have named her Manjeet – one who wins one's mind. She had won her mind. After a certain stage, and it started much earlier than we reached Dabwali, but it concretized there, she had moved away from her body, from disease, from needs and desires. She achieved a state rare for us humans.

Over the days in Dabwali Mamman started falling short of being able to do her normal tasks. We had started feeding her on the table next to her bed but she had to use the bathroom. In the initial days she managed to get up and go to the toilet but needed help with bathing. Masi started combing Mamman's hair; she was reminded of Mamman dressing up Masi when they were younger. We got

Mamman new dresses, *salwars* with elastic belts, as they were easier to slip on and remove.

There were times in the night when I helped Mamman with the toilet. Masi took offence at that. My contention was that Masi was so busy attending to patients all day I did not have the heart to wake her up. All day I looked after Mamman's every need. Masi came in when she could but she herself was barely able to sleep only a couple of hours every night. In that too she was woken up at least twice every night by a call from the hospital downstairs.

Initially Masi feared that her dog Sheru, a small white one of mixed breed, would be a problem for us. He is a very angry dog and barks at everything that moves upstairs. However, in a few days he was eating from my hand and became friends with me. He never once barked at Mamman. The problem was we had occupied the room where Sheru had grown up. I allowed him to stay in the room and was careful about his being under the double bed. He seemed to get really angry if I wanted him to come out from there. I did find it odd that at times when Mamman needed to get up I had to be dealing with Sheru. In fact, a few times, in crises, Sheru did not even listen to Masi.

Intellectually I understood that Sheru was pampered because he was Masi's only companion. Masi has no children and she lost her husband a long time back, in 1985. Yet, our main task was to take care of Mamman and I wanted no interference in that. Sheru bit me once, very close to when I was leaving Dabwali. It was a minor bite and happened in darkness when I tuned from the table and my feet touched him. Masi was very upset with Sheru but I can imagine how terrified he must have been.

We always bite when we are scared. The only way to avoid biting or reacting is by conquering our own fears.

I named this piece Prem for a reason. Prem means love, and this piece is about love. The love for my mother, the love for the work I had with mother, the love that mother had for me, the love of the sisters, the love I got from everyone at Dabwali, and so on. However, this piece is also named after someone who has never had a name for himself, but has always been Masi's Man Friday. That is

Prem, Masi's driver, the person in charge of her home, her documents, her activities, everything related to her. You need anything, ask Prem. You want to get anything done, ask Prem. I heard Prem being called Prem-ji by the ward-boys, nurses, patients, the *sewadars* and *bhaijis* at Gurudwara Chor Mar Sahib, and outside the hospital. I thought it was a very well deserved 'ji'.

Prem has been with Masi for 27 years. He came when he was 12-13 years old. I met his wife, the beautiful Kiran. Prem manages Masi's car. It is a Maruti 800 and has been with her since 1987. Twenty years and it is a beauty to drive and manage. Masi keeps thinking of buying a better, bigger car. But I love her Maruti 800, HRN 4646, and I hope Prem keeps running it the way he does it. I have gone to a lot of places with Prem: within Dabwali, to Patiala, Rajpura, Chandigarh, and even once to Amritsar. The car has never failed us. Prem has never failed us.

I have never seen Prem miss a time given to him, never seen him tired, never heard him complain, never heard anyone complain about him, never known it possible to expect something not to be done once he has been entrusted with the work. Whatever you tell Prem, his response is *Kiwen?* How? Prem is uneducated; he cannot even read road signals and signs. He always wants to understand how to go about something. Once he understands he does the task.

I named this piece Prem because if I could learn some things from his life I would think I did well with my life. I named this piece Prem because it is a record of my learning to be like Prem. They say one can never say anything about a person until the person dies. I only hope Prem remains the way he is today, and then I would have been able to say something final about him in advance.

This time when I stayed at Masi's for about 45 days, I saw her work. Masi is not sweet tongued, or polite to others. She is quite prone to a temper and to getting anxious over small things. Still, what she has created and the way it works, her hospital, is nothing short of a miracle. As Bhabhi said, if Masi were to pour love into people they would have snatched everything from her. Masi lost her husband early, she did not have children, and she had to feud for the little property she got, including the hospital.

She has converted the hospital into a holy place. She works with patients, indiscriminately. Sometimes I saw Masi coming up for meals or a small nap while patients were waiting downstairs. I always told her to go back to them fully realizing how tired Masi must be. I said this because I have had to wait with Mamman for doctors to see her. I have felt humiliated at those times. I have felt inadequate because I should have had the power to make it possible for Mamman not to wait. I cannot forget how long those hours seemed.

Masi always went. She served her patients to the best of her ability. Often she paid for their food and medicine. Milk for every newborn went from her kitchen. She tried to get the best medicines for the patients. In case she found she could not handle a patient she guided them on where to go for treatment. She did not try to make money from them.

Fate handed Masi a rough deal but Masi made the most of it. If nature has created us, she is preserving us. She births newborns. I think she must have birthed at least 10,000 children in her life. She did not create her own child but she created humanity. She is known to be a gynecologist but she takes patients of all varieties. Often people from her area come to her when they are ill, whatever be their illness. She stabilizes them and sends them to other doctors. What else is holy work but to serve humanity? Circumstances gave her little space; she made a mountain of service out of it.

I learnt that one can be qualified like Masi, illiterate like Prem, or semi-educated like the ambulance drivers, but if one wants to, one can serve humanity. All one needs to do is to accept one's lot and work for the betterment of others. That itself is one's own betterment.

In this light it is difficult to reflect upon Masi's relationship with her sister, Mamman. I had once, about twenty years ago, asked Mamman why she does not pray. Her life had been difficult and she had not liked Papa. She answered: what has God given me? Why should I pray? Though in her last two years she listened to the recital of the Guru Granth Sahib from Harimandir Sahib in Amritsar on TV every evening, she never went to God for her needs. Her Gods were Masi and I. She had implicit faith in us.

Once, when I was small, she waited for seven years to hear from Masi. Every afternoon she paced the garden in front of our house in Rourkela. Be it summer, winter, or rains. She was waiting for a letter from Masi. Once, when I was a teenager, Nanaji turned us away from Dabwali and Masi did not stop him. We spent a bitter cold night on Bathinda railway station.

Mamman would still call Masi every weekend and over the last two years ask Masi to take her to Punjab. I got irritated. Last year, when I went to the US for three weeks, I left Mamman with her brother at Patiala. I stopped contact with Masi from two months before I left and a month after I came back. I did not want Mamman to call Masi. It was my ego. I was not comfortable going begging to someone who did not want us.

I judged Masi harshly, though I never said anything. When Mamman was discovered with cardiomyopathy four years ago, Masi did not trust me enough to take care of Mamman. That is why this time it was hard for me to decide to take Mamman to die at Masi's place. Yet, this was the best we could do for Mamman. I wanted to leave no stone unturned to give Mamman the best that was possible.

This time while Mamman was at Dabwali, I understood why Masi always said she could keep Mamman provided I stayed on to take care of her. Even if Masi wants she cannot spare herself for Mamman. Also, Mamman was my responsibility, not Masi's. It was Masi's good *karma* that she could be sensitive to Mamman's scream, get us there to serve Mamman in her last days. Masi's *karma* will be on her side. That is all we can aspire for in our lives: to do our best and hope the circumstances will favour us. That our *karma* is on our side.

One of the biggest issues Masi and I faced was Mamman's constipation. I read in literature on palliative care that one of the certain side effects of medication for cancer is constipation. I discovered it one day when I took Mamman to the toilet and she needed help with pouring water while she was washing herself. I told Masi who had also noticed a bulge in Mamman's tummy. She organized gloves and buckets and we started giving Mamman mild laxatives. Mostly Masi helped and cleaned Mamman. After that she needed my help to pick up Mamman and put her on the bed. I stood near the bathroom window to hear Masi call me.

Masi did not mind cleaning Mamman. She cleans Sheru's pooch, many a time patients who come to the hospital need enemas. Still, initially Masi recoiled at Mamman's condition. I think Mamman's constipation was building up over months. I came back to Bangalore and discovered that Mamman's bathroom flush did not work on full pressure. She needed to pour a bucket of water after going to the toilet. I think ever since Mamman could not pick up the bucket she started avoiding going to the toilet. Many a time in the last few months Mamman took medicine for dysentery if she happened to go to the toilet twice a day. Added to that were the medicines. Pantodac was too mild for what Mamman faced.

When I heard Masi recoil I had half a mind to take Mamman away, though I did not know how I could do that. Then I saw Mamman's benign expression after her toilet, as if: well this is what it is, I cannot help it. That expression undid my ego. I think it also spoke to Masi.

After that, we participated in that one activity, which is most shameful for both the patient and the caregiver, in absolute silence. Our intention became to help Mamman. Once when Masi saw me washing Mamman's dirty *salwar* she gave up on trying to tell me to not participate. She said it was the work of a girl. I said I was a daughter to Mamman.

That is what we became, genderless. We dressed Mamman, helped Mamman in her potty, in her bath. Finally I carried a naked Mamman to and from the bathroom and Masi gave her baths. It was beautiful because it was devoid of all human barriers.

Mamman could trust us. We were her Gods. And she was ours. Her service was our life. Towards the end, one evening, Mamman was irritated. That was the only evening I saw her irritated. Masi asked what she wanted so Mamman replied that we should give her a medicine that would rid her of constipation. We gave her the right dose of laxative. She took it, eased herself the next day and slept well that night.

That night Alprax worked on Mamman. Dr. Arshad, my colleague, had told me to give Alprax instead of Calmpose. I had shown the complete list of medicines to Dr. Arshad for guidance on what I could reduce. He had expressed

his inability to guide me on that and said all 22 tablets were necessary. When Papa had hit 13 tablets I had sensed something was wrong. Now Mamman was on 22, plus the laxative and sometimes injections. As Micheal said, 22 tablets were like a complete lunch.

Mamman slept by around 11 PM. I was working on my computer. Around 12, I came and lay down next to her, watching her. I saw Mamman's face becoming stiff. Her face started contorting, becoming darker. She threw away the sheet covering her and her arms started bending at unusual angles. I sat up in bed. My ears were attuned to her breathing. Her breathing was normal. The oxygen pipe slipped from her nose. I put it back again. Her legs started bending, she started to turn. I gently pushed her back into the position where the oxygen pipe was most comfortable in her nose. Her body kept twisting and soon she became unrecognizable.

I stood up next to her, stepped back, came close, and kept watching her. I do not know if this is an appropriate way of saying this: she started looking like an abject beggar, homeless, destitute, and sick.

A few days back Mammaji, Mamman's brother, had come to be with us. Chachaji, Phuphadji, and Mummyji had come. Mammaji's daughters Kiran and Kaka, his son Happy, and Happy's wife Arsh had come. No one who saw her felt she even looked as sick as we were saying she was. Mammaji was so confused that he even asked me what was wrong with her. I wished they had seen her now. Actually, no, it was good I was seeing her alone. I felt it was something only I should have seen, even could have seen. I felt this was something that a force beyond me was showing me.

A human child is born stripped of all dignity. The blood and body-fluid drenched child has little chance of surviving if it is not nurtured immediately. Through our life we acquire riches, become powerful. I do not think Mamman could have had a better bed to sleep in, better clothes to wear, better care and oxygen supply. This was what the richest get. Maybe their cots are made of gold, but this is how we can finally clothe ourselves, cover ourselves. However, I saw,

nature has a way of stripping us of everything we put on ourselves through our lives. It makes us vulnerable and removes all our pretence.

The *maya* goes and the truth emerges. This truth is evident when we are born; the truth is evident when we die. If this is the truth of those two important points of our lives, then what is life? What does it mean to live? Is it possible to live as if the truth is ever present?

Slowly, as the night turned, Mamman got back her looks. By morning she started looking as she was when she went to sleep. I covered her. I did not speak about what I had seen.

We were nearing the day of Mamman's demise but I was never certain when it would come. It had been different with Papa. With him I was able to say three days before his end that he was getting closer. Of course, the timing of his death still shocked and surprised me, but I had been pretty accurate in my prognosis of his condition. With Mamman it was different. Maybe because I had been correct with Papa, I was jumping to conclusions with Mamman.

In fact, I had expected her to go when we had just reached Bangalore from Punjab in early April. How was I to know that Mamman would give herself a month at Masi's where she would be treated like a queen?

Soon after the night episode, either the next day or the day after next, I was sitting at my table at 4 PM when Mamman asked for another *khes*, a cotton rug. I thought she might be a little cold and gave her the *khes*. I checked her temperature. It was fine. Her breathing was normal. I went back to working when Mamman asked for a blanket. I went out of the room, found Prem, and asked him for a blanket. Prem went to Masi's room, opened her bed, and pulled out a very good quality, warm blanket. Prem and I put that on Mamman. The air conditioner was off and I switched off the cooler.

I asked Prem to call Masi. He said some *Bhaiji's* from the Chor Mar Sahib Gurudwara had come and Masi was attending to them. I listened to Mamman's breathing again. It was normal.

Masi had told me that when nobody held her hand she had held God's hand. She believes God is with her and has even converted one room in her home into a

Gurudwara. She prays every day. I told Prem to ask her to come upstairs as soon as she was done.

In the last few days Mamman and I often did the *mool mantar*. It was not out of a sense of religion. It was more a custom. I do not think Mamman ever analyzed the lines. Always I led the recitation. Masi had given me a compact disc of *Nit Nem* and I played it in morning before I played Mamman songs from her favourite cassette. From time to time I also played the *Sukhmani Sahib* on tape. I sometimes asked God to lift Mamman before she really suffers. That was the only thing I ever asked him, will ask him.

Over the past few days Mamman's back had started perforating. She had started developing rashes under her wound, though the hole itself had almost closed. While we were at Dabwali a patient of Masi complained about pain in the breast. Masi immediately referred her for mammography. It turned out the woman had breast cancer and the doctors operated on her. They sliced off her breast. Later, she came to Masi to get her breast dressed. Masi said that Mamman's laceration seemed exactly like that woman's who had undergone surgery.

We had done Mamman's X-ray and found the fluid in her lungs to be rising. We had done another test to find that her CA 15-3 protein levels. They were 265 when normal is 0.5-32. CA 15-3 protein is a marker of the extent of breast cancer. Mamman did not get any pain or said she had no pain. What was it that prevented pain? Was it God?

I know a story. There was a priest and a robber. The priest prayed to God every day and every day the robber came and slapped the idol of God with his slippers. On days when it rained or if it was too hot the priest excused himself from prayers but the robber never let up. Finally when God appeared, he appeared to the robber and not the priest. Was Mamman's steadfast refusal to acknowledge God so great that God had intervened and helped her? I do not know. I do not believe that God really comes to help us. Still there is the matter of Mamman's cancerous breast vanishing and she not getting any pain.

I did not know what to do to make Mamman warm. I started massaging her feet. She was not getting any warmth. I started massaging her hands. She was still

feeling cold. I wondered if this is how death comes, like a chill. I had seen Papa just after he passed away. I reached home on May 20, 2003 at 6.15 PM. I had not seen him going, though I think he was still alive when I reached him. He did not say anything; he was cold, yet his breath vanished slowly while he was in my hands. I thought I was seeing the chill invade Mamman.

Suddenly the room door opened and I saw a priest. Masi was with him and introduced him as Bhai Gurpal Singh from Chor Mar Sahib. He was tall, angular faced, and had a certain serenity. I turned towards him, still holding Mamman's hand and asked him if could do some prayers. In my mind there was nothing more pious than prayers when Mamman was leaving her body. I think God has not created the prayers so it was not a call for God. The Guru Granth Sahib is a collection of beautiful poetry by a set of poets who mused upon life and living. What could be better than reciting some pure words when someone was dying? He asked what prayers. I said *Japuji Sahib*. He said this was not the time for that. I said anything, *Sukhmani Sahib*, just the *mool mantar*.

He quickly went to the bathroom to wash his hands and feet and came back. In the Sikh tradition we do not have any person at a level higher than the level from where the prayers are recited. Knowing that Mamman could not get up he climbed on to the double bed and sat down cross-legged. He started reciting the *mool mantar*, and a bit of the *Japuji Sahib*. Masi sat on a chair, Prem stood at the door. I covered my head with a towel and knelt down next to Mamman, crying and rubbing her hands. Bhai Gurpal Singh recited the prayers for ten minutes. Those minutes, for me, was a period of total acceptance of what might happen.

In those minutes Mamman's face started gaining colour. When Bhaiji finished I asked Mamman how she was feeling. She said she was fine. I asked if she was cold. She said no, I could remove the blanket. She said *Sat Sri Akal* to Bhaiji. I touched his feet.

What was this? Did God come to save Mamman? I feel no, God did not come. If there is a God he does not come when we recite prayers. I feel it was the power of recitation, of centering your thoughts. Some power was showing me how we can center ourselves to rise above our maladies.

My only difficulty in believing in God, apart from the fact that I do not think one power can create the universe and run it, is that I want to live without an ego. God is the supreme power. How can we mere mortals aspire to connect with him and get his grace in our lives? To believe that the supreme creator has his hand on you is to quest for a share in that power. I hate power. I have seen many religious people who believe in God to be so full of the 'I' that it disgusts me. I feel that God is too busy handling creation and its activities to focus on me. I feel I cannot disturb him. Perhaps that is why I have never been able to ask God for anything. I think some force has created us and our best way of living a life is by accepting what that force does to us, and dealing with our difficulties.

Papa passed away on May 20, 2003. Sudeep uncle, Masi's husband, had passed away on May 14, 1985. Masi arranged for a *paath* for both Papa and uncle, together, at Gurudwara Chor Mar Sahib. The final *ardas* was on May 20. Masi came back from the Gurudwara and told Mamman that she had got the *paath* done for both uncle and Papa. Mamman's eyes shone and I thanked Masi. I had not known what to do with Papa's anniversary this year. Every year, on that day, Mamman and I used to go to the Gurudwara in Bangalore. I was thankful that Masi had done something. For Mamman it was more than that: the fact that the *paath* was done for both uncle and Papa meant to Mamman that Masi had accepted Papa.

On May 21 Mamman got creptations. After that every morning we spent hours reviving Mamman. Finally, we kept the oxygen on 24 hours and started feeding Mamman while she lay on the bed. In those days, every time it happened, Masi and Raja tried out these four things: a nebuliser, injections to raise or reduce blood pressure, and a drop for the heart. I wondered if these were the only weapons human beings had evolved over the last couple of thousand years to fight death. It seemed to me that we humans are very inadequate in the face of death.

On the morning of May 28 we found it hard to revive Mamman. We tried injections, nebuliser, drops, everything, but Mamman could not open her eyes. Masi even brought the holy water from the *sarovar* at Amritsar and touched it to

Mamman's eyelids and put some in her mouth. After some time Mamman opened her eyes. It had taken us six hours.

That afternoon something not so good happened between Masi and me. At around 4 PM Mamman said she wanted to go to the bathroom. For the last couple of days we had encouraged Mamman to urinate and even defecate on the bed. We had spread plastic sheets. Many a time I had changed her in the middle of night. Masi always wanted to participate but she was sleeping and I did not disturb her. After all she had done, I did not want to disturb her with something I could handle. I did make sure that when I did this Mamman's breathing did not waver.

Masi had a delivery scheduled at 4 PM. Mamman forced herself to sit up and very forcefully started asking me to help her to the bathroom. I removed her oxygen tube and helped her to the toilet seat. I went to the kitchen to look for the boy to call Masi. He was not there. I came back and helped Mamman to the bed. I fixed her nebuliser and ran down to get Masi. I saw Masi had not yet got into the OT. I called her.

Masi came up and checked Mamman's BP. It had fallen. She quickly arranged for an injection and while she was treating Mamman she started berating me. Her words were harsh. She had panicked.

Everything came out. She scolded me for not discovering Mamman's illness in advance. She scolded me for carrying out the activities as if I was alone while I was with her, for not letting her participate. She scolded me for not having done enough for Mamman, for not keeping my marriage. She scolded me for not having a woman in my life who could have looked after Mamman. She said if I had a woman we would not have had to get Mamman to Punjab. She scolded me for letting Mamman go on her own to the toilet. The last was her main point and she was not willing to listen to the fact that I did not encourage Mamman.

I gave in to anger. I started speaking back. I did it in English so that the ward boy did not understand. Luckily he was not Raja. I did not want him to know that I was speaking back to Masi. I said I have not known of another way but to be alone. I have done my best, she has done her best, but where was she or anybody for the whole of Mamman's life? It is a fact that Mamman yearned for care and

love but no one could give it to her. I said that as soon as I could earn I got both Mamman and Papa to live with me. I saw to it that Papa fulfilled his wishes before he died; I am seeing to it that Mamman fulfills her wishes. There has been no one and there will be no one after I leave Dabwali. After that I walked out of the room.

It occurred to me that the last month or 25 days had been most fulfilling for Mamman but they did not take away from the fact that Mamman had been neglected by her own and Papa's family all her life. Did this month mean that all that happened until now was false? No, I thought to myself, it did not mean that. The period before that month was true and the month was also true. The period in the future will be true. All truth exists. All of it exists simultaneously. Each moment contains in it the truth of the past, present, and future.

I came back. Masi had deputed her ward boy to supervise Mamman. He was doing a very inadequate job. Masi came, Mamman had urinated again. I let her change Mamman. She was doing it badly because her hands were trembling. I could not see it any more. I helped her. We saw Mamman had also defecated. We cleaned up Mamman. Masi realized Mamman had wanted to go to the toilet and could not ask me to clean her. I cried. I apologized to Masi. I did not cry for what I had said, but for being angry. Masi told me my anger was the same as it was when I was a child.

I also told Mamman to listen to us and tell us what she needs. Mamman stayed quiet. Masi and I made up. We talked to Mamman. That night we both fed her. In some ways the outburst relaxed us. Our poison came out and we became lighter.

It also did something to Mamman. I remember a few days before Papa passed away I had scolded him. Papa had called me at the office saying he wanted to get new sofa covers. I said we must wait. He did not listen and started shouting at me. I had to raise my voice and silence him. In a few days I got a new showcase made but Papa saw it only once. He passed away a few days after that. He died of cardiac arrest. Mamman also died of cardiac arrest. Both their hearts collapsed but my anger broke their hearts before they collapsed.

I am not beating myself up for what happened. Though I do realize that anger is a very destructive force. I also realize that anger when it comes from the tongue is most destructive. If I do not learn it now, I will never learn it.

I had been informing Mamman's brother at Patiala and Papa's family at Rajpura about the developments. The next day people from Rajpura came to see Mamman. Chachaji, Phuphadji, Mummyji, Bhabhiji, and Lali Veerji came. Right from the morning, Mamman was forgetting that she had had her tea. After I gave it to her early in the morning with a spoon, while she was lying down, she asked for it. I thought maybe the tea she had was too cold. I asked for a little warmer tea. She took that but soon forgot that she had it. I gave it to her again at 9 AM.

This was the second day we were trying out crushed medicine pills. It was such a simple idea to crush her tablets, but it never occurred to me earlier. That is what we need when we provide care: simple and effective ideas. There was so much to learn.

At around 10.30 AM she again asked for tea. I was just finishing a call. I told her when the Rajpura people come we will give her tea. After five minutes she asked when would the Rajpura people come? I said fifteen minutes. They came and met Mamman. Mamman talked to each one, she even asked about Manju Bhabhi's daughter Muskaan. I asked the ladies to sit in the room while I fed Mamman tea again. I atoned for getting angry with Masi the previous day. We talked some more. I tried to feed *daal* and *roti* to Mamman. She could not eat much. I asked Masi to feed her. Prem had made *rajma* and rice. Masi asked Mamman if she would eat that. Mamman nodded.

I sat down for lunch with others. Masi was feeding Mamman inside. Just when I was finishing lunch, and others were about to eat the mangoes, Masi called me to Mamman's room.

Mamman was gasping for breath. Raja was sitting on the bed trying to give Mamman an injection. Masi was standing near Mamman, holding her hand. She was crying. I thought I heard Mamman say '*cha*' (tea) once. Then she was quiet. I went close to Mamman. I waved to Raja to not try the injection any more. I knew Mamman had begun her next journey. I started saying that I was proud she was

my mother, that I had not seen her kind of courage in any one, that she had been a truly brave daughter of her father, that I was president, that I had learnt so much from her, that she and I had had a wonderful life, and Papa had worked hard to ensure we got that life. Mamman was almost without breath. She opened her eyes and I started reciting the *mool mantar*. I told her Masi and I are with her. We love her. Mamman passed away.

It was 2.15 PM. The people from Rajpura stayed back. Masi, Bhabhi and I bathed Mamman. We dressed her. Masi was so prepared for this. She had clothes for Mamman and me. We planned the cremation on the same day. People had started gathering. Two of Masi's very good friends, whom she calls brothers and who have been with her through all her crises, Randhir Uncle and Bharpur Uncle came and helped with the process until the funeral.

I had called Mammaji and they were frantically trying to reach Dabwali. The sun was to set at 7.30 PM. Mammaji arrived at 7.25 PM. I asked Dowapr, Happy's son and whose favourite uncle I am, to be with me. That small boy and I lit the pyre. In her funeral Mamman fulfilled another wish of hers: she did not want to be cremated at an electric crematorium. Masi reminded me of that. I hugged her and we both cried.

Bhai Gурpal Singh said the prayers. I stayed back until the funeral pyre went out. Ratiya and other workers from Masi's farm helped with the cremation. Lali Veerji was with me. After about half an hour of the pyre he said that Mamman's head had burnt. I did not believe him. That head which had confused the world and which could wait until every wish could be fulfilled, could not burn so easily. Truly so, it was the last portion of her body to decimate. It took three hours.

Mamman had been going and stopping for the last few days. I think she was waiting for Papa's family to come. It might sound odd but I believe each of us lives and dies according to our beliefs. In *Sepia Leaves* I record how Mamman went away and then chose to come back and make a family with Papa. She had wanted to die in her real home, in Punjab, and in the presence of Papa's family. That Mummyji, Papa's elder brother's wife, and now the head of our family had come to meet her was important. In a way she released Mamman.

I slept fitfully that night. I had taken Alprax and Proxyvon, Mamman's medicines. I think I got sleep for close to two hours in the morning. I dreamt that I was back at nursery school. I was standing at the gate. The mothers of all the other children had come and taken them. I was waiting for Mamman. She had not come. I woke up.

I told Masi that Mamman had to be immersed in the Ganga at Haridwar. I also said that the prayers should be done in her room. Masi arranged the rest. Everything worked out with exquisite precision in the hands of Prem.

The next morning we picked the flowers, a euphemism for bones. We kept them in the locker of the cremation ground. In the afternoon we took the ashes of the wood to a canal close by. When we emptied the gunnysack I saw the ashes spreading out in the canal in the form of a human body. The arms stretched to the sides, the body horizontal. It was similar to how Mamman was when we picked the *chador* from her before taking her for her last bath, before her funeral.

That evening we left for Haridwar. When we were getting ready I asked Masi if she thought that I had done my best for Mamman. She asked me to ask myself. I could not. It was too immediate. I now think that if I can live my life according to my parents' *sanskars*, their values, I will continue to serve them. When we picked the flowers from the locker, something came upon me and I handed them to Masi. It would have been okay if I had let her hold them for a while but I felt I was respecting her by letting her hold them all the way. It upset her. I should have reached out for them from time to time.

I could not close my eyes for a moment from the time I picked the flowers until we immersed them in the Ganga. That day as soon as I closed my eyes I saw horrible things: Mamman's body being cut in the middle, a pile of feces next to her pyre, and so on. I do not know why that happened. I was grappling with those images, maybe that is why I did not take the flowers from Masi. To lighten my mood I was trying to joke with Chachaji who was sitting next to me. For me the head of Papa's family was Mummyji but the body was Chachaji. I thought I could relax with him.

We reached Haridwar. Masi and I immersed the flowers at the very same place where Mamman and I had immersed Papa's flowers. In my mind I sang 'Jeena yahan, Marna yahan', just like I had sung *Madhushala* for Papa. I looked up and I do not know if it was an apparition but I saw two fishes swimming away. I had my bath in the Ganga, I felt peaceful. Like at Papa's time, the flowing river gave me peace. For me a flowing river is a metaphor for life. Masi was uncomfortable in the squalor of the *ghats*. Happy arranged a room for her to rest. We stopped at Swami Ramdev's ashram at Haridwar and at Gurudwara Dukhniwaran Sahib at Patiala.

At Gurudwara Dukhniwaran Sahib, Chachaji told me that it was wrong that I joked about him. I clamped up. After that I never spoke to Chachaji. I responded to his queries but never initiated any talk. For the days he was at Dabwali I took care of his clothes and belongings, arranged for his things to be prepared for him to wear, but I stopped talking to him.

When I went to see Bhabhiji's home before I left for Bangalore, my mind was bursting with all the wrongs Papa's family had done to Mamman. Very graphically I remembered scenes from my childhood when this family used to treat Mamman as if she was an animal, an errant buffalo. The way they used to beat her, lock her up. That night I spoke to Mummyji. I was in a drunken stupor. I apologized to her the next day and again after coming back to Bangalore. I apologized not for what I said but because I had still not forgotten. I do want to forget and not abuse anyone, but I cannot help remembering all the wrong things the family did to Mamman until I grew up and supported her. Chachaji has called often, even volunteered to come down and be with me. I avoid speaking to him. He was my past; I have nothing to do with it.

The next day we started the *Akhand Paath*. It is a 48-hour non-stop reading of the Guru Granth Sahib. That is when I saw Prem in action. Prem was everywhere: in the kitchen, arranging the room for the Bhaijis, organizing the *ardas* where around 300 to 400 people came, taking care of the food and sleep of all the people who were at home in those three days. In spite of that, I often heard Masi scold him, chide him, and even be nasty. He never took anything to heart. The anger of

the tongue is the worst kind of anger. I wondered what made Prem accept it. I never saw Prem upset or frowning. Prem was humility incarnate. The reasons I thought he was so accepting were two:

- a) The work that Masi did was beyond herself. It was the service of humanity, God's work. In such a place one learnt to live without an ego.
- b) Prem has moved away from the 'you' and 'me'. He is without an ego.

I would like to emulate him.

In those three days two people told me important things. Tejinder, the son of the woman whose cancer was operated upon, said in life our attempt should be to create a vacuum in our mind. To reach a state we move above feeling and thinking and go towards absorption. Another *Bhaiji* told me how once we conquer our mind, the body does not matter. He told me a story from Sikh lore where enemies were putting a man into fire and he kept chanting the name of one of the Gurujis. Finally he was unscathed and the Guruji had blisters on his body. He told me how he himself had willed to bathe in the cold waters of Hemkunt Sahib and felt absolutely comfortable.

I had chosen to serve the *Bhaijis* who were reading the Guru Granth Sahib. I did it the same way I had served Mamman, by not sleeping for more than 15 minutes at a time. For me it was the same room. Mamman had been replaced by the *paath*, but the work had not ceased. I had served someone here who was leaving for the next journey; I wanted to serve someone here who was teaching us to live this life.

The *paath* ended, the *ardas* took place. The head of Gurudwara Chor Mar Sahib, a respected holy man even gifted me a *siropa*, an honour from the Gurudwara. I was surprised. I think it had more to do with the relationship between Masi and the Gurudwara than with me. I accepted it and asked Bhai Gural Singh the significance of the *siropa*. He said it was for my services, towards the *Bhaijis* and towards my mother.

I said what happened between Mamman and me was what will happen between any mother and son. When we are born our parents take care of us. They teach us how to eat, walk, talk, and be a human being. They clean us, wash us,

and take care of us in sickness and health. They do it for a number of years. It is natural that when they come to a state where they need help we be available. All I understood was that the Gurudwara was happy about something that was really between my mother and me. Thank you.

I stayed on until June 18. After the way we had joined forces I did not want to abandon Masi. Before I left Punjab I met a few people, one among them was Mammaji's daughter-in-law's Bhuaji. She is older than Mamman, but had served Mamman for a few days when I had left Mamman at Mammaji's place to go to the US last year. When Bhuaji is quiet and not speaking her lips turn into a smile and her eyes twinkle. She has found her inner peace and glows in it. Everybody was saying what a good son I had been and how I had served Mamman. She asked what was great about it. It was my duty. She understood.

While leaving the room to come back to Bangalore I cried. That was the only time I cried apart from when Mamman's life was going away. On my way to Delhi we stopped at Gurudwara Chor Mar Sahib. I had learnt that Bhai Gural Singh's wife is also like Mamman. She is mentally ill. I told her to always take her medication. I hope the medicines and her prayers help her live a slightly easier life. I learnt that she serves the head of the Gurudwara selflessly. All that is wrong with those who we call mentally ill is that they fall out of harmony with the world as we define and live it. That is not a sin. It is only a mark of the sensitivity of those people. We visited Gurudwara Bangla Sahib on the way to Delhi airport.

I came back. No one came to receive me at the airport. I picked my car from Chinni's home and went to my place. I opened the door, and went upstairs. Famida had not touched Mamman's room. I had told her not to. I lay down on Mamman's bed. A few days before Mamman passed away I had dreamt that I had gone back to Bangalore and was sleeping in Papa's room, which after him I had made my own. Mamman was calling me from her bed, the way she used to in her last days at Bangalore. I dreamt that I could not get up. Her cries drove me crazy. I did not want that to happen to me. I slept in Mamman's bed.

Every day I wake up and have my breakfast. Famida cooks the dinner. I have taken out some old photographs. I will blow them up and put them on the walls. I will live in this house the best I can. Some day I will leave and never return.

I want to live my life according to my parents' values. I want to live a new life. I want to re-imagine myself. That is the only way I can live, and if I cannot I would like to go away. I have performed the responsibilities I inherited as a child. Life is a right but every right brings its duties. I have fulfilled the duties, now is the time to enjoy the rights. Papa and Mamman marked not only my last eight years but the whole time since I was born. In all my thirty-five years there has never been a time when I decided something by not acknowledging them. I have lived a life under their shadow. It is fine with me if I can do nothing more. However, if I can build something it would be satisfying.

I have a number of ideas what to do next. I am taking six months to get into shape before I decide. My parents are no longer around to impose upon my thoughts and feeling. Though they will always regulate me from inside. I have become free and will keep it that way.